

Clouds lightly veiled the sun, soft curling wisps of pale blue-white, enough to keep the day cool, but not to dampen the glory of the pasture land that swept away as far as the eye could see, broken only by the low roll of hills, or small tangles of gorse. It lay like a brilliant jewel, glowing green as the eyes of a night hunting cat but not winking at the full light of the sun, much less this pleasant half-shade. Long winds ruffled the grass and coiled shadows from the delicate clouds gambling over the ground, picking out the tiny humps and hollows in the sweeping vista, unseen by the naked eye.

Branwen was at the stream doing the washing, her skirts raised up about her knees, swinging the heavy lengths of waterlogged cloth, to strike them repeatedly against the flat rock by the water's edge, occasionally lifting her bare foot to press out the excess water against the rough surface of the ancient stone whenever a piece got too heavy. Sometimes, as she did this, she could see a thin trail of dirt flow out, indicating she had more work left to do. Resignedly, she would watch it briefly cloud the ice-bright water around her before it was swept off downstream by the current. Her rich chestnut hair, her greatest claim to beauty, had been gathered into a severe knot on the back of her head. Even the strands that had escaped, shaken loose by the force of her labor, hung dull and limp, nothing at all like the glorious, shining crown that had once caught the eye of the one who had changed her life forever.

The stream ran close beside the steading where she had lived for the past ten turns of the seasons and more. In that house her daughter had been born and she was now a great girl of seven winters, or was it eight? Her beautiful laughing Gwen, more golden even than her father. It was hard to remember now that there had been a time she had never seen this place that now was all she knew, the green plains, banked to white in winter, the vast sky in all its moods, the chattering stream, the wood and hill behind the steading. And the house itself that her husband and his friends and kin had built, flooded with the fresh smell of the meadow in summer and of warm wood smoke in winter. True, the southwest corner of the roof leaked and never seemed to improve no matter how many times Maelmuire shored up the turves on it but she was so used to it now she hardly noticed.

She struck the long wet coil of one of her dresses, the mossy green one, looking darker than ever now, against the rock another time, feeling the breath tight in her chest with the exertion. Soon she would spread them out on the soft meadow grass to dry and adsorb its sweet scent, let the linens bleach white in the sun. She drew her hand across her brow. It was almost the season for blackberries. She should go search once she was finished here. The berries, so full to the brim with sweet goodness were beyond easy to ferment, at least a little, and she could keep the drink cool in the stream to provide a refreshing cup for her husband when he came back from tending the cattle in the evenings. Even after all these years, she was still so very proud of her blackberry draft. Even as a young lass, it had been exceptional.

It was, after all, the drink that had brought her and her husband together. He had come with his kin to trade horses with her people. Back then he was already known by all as Maelmuire Gruac, Melmuire of the fine locks, so handsome with the long golden waves of his hair, sitting tall on his horse, great gray Liath. The day was hot when he had ridden past the earth house where young Branwen had been staying with her sisters to herd sheep in the upland pastures, but they were from home and she could not help herself, told herself it was only good hospitality. She had called out to him to come and water his horse and shelter from the heat in the cool doorway of the earth house. Then, shyly, she had produced a measure of her prized blackberry drink and they had drunk it leaning against opposite walls of the narrow entry way, so close there was not space enough for a third person to have passed between them. They had talked and laughed and Branwen's head had spun far more than could be justified by the slight ferment of the drink. After, lying on her pallet, smelling the earth of the walls, utterly unable to sleep, she half believed she had imagined it all. But he came back, now

going out of his way to ride past her dwelling. Again and again, as the days lengthened, they stood in the entryway and talked, the sweet fruit draft sharp in Brwanwen's throat and the heat in her face not from the summer sun.

But there were no blackberries in the hedges today. Perhaps it was still too early in the year, as she should have known. She had lived here long enough but still she had been hopeful, likely foolishly so. Now she was behind schedule to see to the evening meal and would need to go out again at sundown to retrieve the washing. At this season there was still fresh cheese, sometimes fresh beef, though the shank she was currently shaving to add to the pot was lightly smoked, and, of course, fresh vegetables from the garden. While the pot warmed over the fire, she took flour, salt, and butter, a luxury to some but a thing that, as cattle herders, her husband's kin always had in ample supply, and began working them together, to shape into rounds that could be laid in the ashes.

She was just taking the flat cakes off the hearth and ladling up spoonfuls of clotted cream, skimmed from the morning milk when she heard the drum of hooves outside and the sound of Maelmuire and his kinsmen calling to one another. She listened carefully, aware she would need to make up more bread to bake on the hearth should the kinsmen decide to stay to eat with them, and likely fetch down a fresh cask of ale as well. But this night they were eager to be off home to their own steadings and she heard them ride away, then the heavy dragging of Maelmuire's steps as he led his horse off to the shelter around at the back of the house, indicating, once again, he had come home sore and weary from being in the saddle much of the day, watching over the cattle, prepared to defend them from raids if need be.

Branwen felt a prick of bitterness. She was sore too from the effort of the washing and, while Maelmuire would be able to put his feet up for the rest of the evening, warm by the hearth, to do small mending and amuse Gwen, she would have to clean up from the meal and then go out again to bring in the clean linens. But it would do them no good to quarrel so, by the time he had finished his outside work and stumbled into the house, dumping his weapons on the bench by the door, she was ready to greet him with a smile, as she always did. And if that smile was a little stiff around the edges now, Maelmuire never noticed and, frequently, neither did she. Gwen, who had been ladling stew into bowls and setting them on the table, came rushing to embrace her father, offering him a fresh cloak, warmed at the fire to replace the one he had worn outside all day. He ruffled her hair and his beautiful blue eyes, so often dull now, lit briefly at the sight of her. Weary as he was, Maelmuire did not say much and focused mostly on eating, but he did offer a few words regarding the progress of the spring calves. Gwen exclaimed delightedly over the tidings and even Branwen felt a flicker of interest though, after all these years, the marvel of young life grown did not affect her nearly as much as it once had, then perhaps it should have.

After the meal, Maelmuire drew up a bench before the hearth to mend a worn part of his saddle and Gwen settled herself against the side of it to mend a rent in his cloak. Her stitches had improved remarkably in the past year and, though they were still too large and uneven for use on the family's good clothes, this was only a working garment and she was so proud to finally be able to do her part. And Branwen turned to her weary task of bringing in the washing. The sky had darkened to the deep red of a plum, shading to blue-black in the far east with a single jewel-bright star shining out with almost painful intensity. The shadow of the hill behind the steading stretched long and black across her path and, as she stepped through it, it came to her that she would climb the hill tonight, would bear a stone up to the cairn on top.

It was Maelmuire's sister, Nessa, who had taught the ritual to her when she had first come here, all those years ago, when she was alone and friendless far from home, the costly result of a trading venture gone wrong. As she carefully gathered and folded the washing in the failing light she recalled the wild whirl of joy and pain that had been that time. When his kindred were ready to sail for home,

Maelmuire had found he could not endure to be parted for her, had begged her to come with him. Maelmuire Gruac with his golden hair raying all about him like the sun itself. How could she refuse? He set her before him on Liath and they rode for the coast where his kin were taking ship, with all the speed his best of horses could muster, the wind in her face, the mount coiling and uncoiling beneath her like a great serpent, the arm of her welcome abductor round her waist, his chest, and more, firm against her back. In that fleeting eternity of wonder, she seemed to fly, as if anything was possible.

But her kin had followed harder than Maelmuire had anticipated and reached the coast before they could get the boat well away and, as he absolutely refused to give her up, his kin had to unload many of the fine horses they had failed to trade and leave them to pacify her relatives, an extravagant bride price indeed, especially for one who brought neither alliance nor goods to the match. When the offer of horses had been drawn up, far too generous...and valuable to be refused with honor or sense, her brothers, stepping forward to accept by offering her dowery in exchange as was custom, had flung a single cauldron down, old and dented, and Branwen had burned with shame at their public declaration of her lack of worth. The insult was not lost on Maelmuire and his kin but they had swallowed it, wanting only to be away without loss of life, but she felt their eyes cold on her all during the voyage across the narrow strip of wild sea between her land and his.

But Nessa had been kind to her. Branwen felt a slight tug at her heart as she draped the washing over the tangled briars of the hedge fence then continued on passed the steading into the shadows of the wood beyond. It was time to select a stone. It must not be so heavy she would never be able to actually reach the top of the hill with it, but it could not be too light for, if it was not heavy enough to hold the weight of the troubles she would lay on it, the entire ritual would be in vain. That was what Nessa had told her. She selected one, slightly larger than her two fists, not quite ovoid, with a depression in the middle that she could carry against her side, nestled in the crook of her arm, light enough that she could lift it easily with both hands but she knew she would feel its weight by the time she reached the hilltop, especially with the effort of pushing through the heavy tangles of underbrush in the wood that had grown as rich as the grass down on the plain.

Lowering her face until she could smell its damp mineral smell, she whispered into the hollow, "Oh stone, hard and strong, made from the very bones of the earth, take on your back my troubles that you are so much more able to bear." And she told it of how she feared she did not give enough to her husband or her daughter and felt herself utterly unable to do more, her weariness, her loneliness, the tightness in her heart, the emptiness, the awareness that she had become little more than a hollow shell, especially in comparison to that wild spirit, full of wonder and song, who had ridden the wind and wave while her hopes, unwavering, leaped from her heart to touch the sky, who would dare anything to lie in the arms of her love. That mighty music had beat in her blood all through the early years of toil, matching the stroke of the mallet as she pounded fence posts, the thump of the dash in the butter churn, of the dough on the kneading board, the slap of the wet washing on the rock. She had crooned it to the tiny bundled shape they put into her arms after the harrowing ordeal of birth. But note by note, measure by measure, it had slipped away, so slowly and gradually, she had not noticed until it was gone. "I miss the music of life," she whispered, then, tucking the rock into the crook of her elbow, began on her slow, shuffling way into the forest.

It was much darker here, under the shadow of the trees, with the hill cutting off much of the final fading rays of the sun, though there was still enough light for her to make out, sometimes just, the pale gray track of the path. Of course, following this did not mean an easy walk. The path wound, often quite sharply, back and forth up the side of the hill and there were overgrown sections, loose stones and fallen logs, but it was far better than if there had been no path at all. Branwen trudged on while, as she had predicted, the stone she carried grew heavier and heavier, causing her to bend increasingly towards it, while her opposite side burned and cramped from the strain of resisting the

weight. Stopping briefly, she shifted the rock to the other side, then went on, flinching as a particularly supple branch whipped back against her, barking her shin against the side of a decayed and moss covered log.

At last she reached the top of the hill, the open sky, now rose-purple, abruptly overhead, still bleeding faintly at its very western point, where it brushed the edge of the dark, vast sea. And directly before her, the cairn of stones, roughly shoulder high and broad enough that a man could stretch flat on the ground within its compass, stark and jagged even in the failing light. Well, at least there was no missing the top of this mound. Through a haze of time and distance so thick it seemed dream rather than memory, Branwen recalled her mother, struggling to keep track of her and all her siblings as they ran about, frequently holding forth on the folly of always being so eager to climb to the top of hills.

"What be the point?" she admonish them, frowning. "Don't the fools know that once you reach the top of a hill, there's nowhere to go but down? They struggle so hard, dreaming of having the world under them and half the time they don't even realize when they reach the crest, so wrapped do they become in the toil of the climb, hot and thirsty, clawed at by brambles." Branwen was currently very familiar with this last sensation. As a child--had she ever really been that young?--she had hated these fatalistic musings of her mother. Now she could well understand the weariness, the sameness, the feelings of futility that could provoke them and sternly made a vow in her heart to never say anything to Gwen about climbing hills. Let the girl have a high heart and big dreams for as long as she could hold them before life crushed them out of her, unblemished by words of "wisdom" about how her hopes could never be. What gain to try and make her confront the useless, banal, stupid misery of it all before she had to?

Regardless, she was here now. Time to do what she had come to do. She approached the cairn, the unmistakable cairn of the crest, feeling the weight of the stone as she took it two handed again, a proper offering. According to the legend Nessa had told her, the cairn was the tomb of an ancient warrior woman who had led her troops into battle and ruled the lands round with stern power. But that was just a story and there was no marker or any sign at all that the mound had been intended as a tomb, much less who was buried there. She drew nearer, stooping slightly to look for a likely place to slip the rock she carried in amongst the other stones that already made up the mound, so she could leave it behind along with the troubles she had poured into it. She spied a dark hollow low to the right and bent to it, eager to lay down her burden, finding it almost the perfect size and shape for her purpose.

But, as she was about to slide the stone into the space that seemed ready made for it, she caught sight of something else, just inside the lip of the opening, bits of moss, grass stems, even some feathers and tufts of fur, all wound together into a ball. A wild creature was making a nest there. There was no doubt, though she could see no hollow or opening as yet in the bundle of soft material, much less an egg or any such thing, and to lay the stone there would crush it, or at best block access to it, making all the work of the wild thing to build a home, just as she struggled so hard to do every day, to have been for naught. So, instead, she balance the rock on a small shelf a little below and off to the left and there it perched precariously, tottering slightly until she turned it exactly the right way. She had a wild imagining of the stone losing balance and dropping free of the cairn, the troubles she had poured into it shaken loose, at liberty to come rolling down the hill after her.

She must go quickly before it became too dark to see her way down, for she could not roll like the ball of troubles. Already the pale sliver of the new moon was rising, too thin and wan to give much light. She should have brought a lantern with her but had not thought of it in her turmoil. She turned her back on the place and began the long and halting descent. Her mother was wrong. Knowing you had reached the summit and everything now would be descent did not help at all. Far better to pass the peak unaware and still maintain some withered scraps of hope. One thing was sure, being freed of the heavy stone did not make her heart any lighter. The warrior woman in the tomb, if she even existed,

must be bowed down under the burden of all the troubles lesser women had heaped on her through the long years, pinned under the weight of worry rocks too vast for even her mighty limbs to shift.

When Nessa had first told her the story, shortly after her arrival, Branwen had found the idea of the warrior woman thrilling, had enjoyed imagining herself as a kind of kindred spirit. After all, she had left behind all that was known and safe, fared forth into the unknown, dared the wild ocean crossing. Surely that qualified her on some level as brave and adventurous. And then, when she had struggled so hard to make a home here in a foreign land, she had drawn strength from imagining herself like that mighty mythic being mounded on the hill behind her. Her tools were the weapons she wielded with skill and dedication, to the point of utter fatigue of both the body and the mind, when she herded the lesser livestock, the sheep and geese, about the steading, she was directing her troops to best strategic advantage, and when she tallied up the goods in the loft, the cold storage, the butter, cheese, the apples and smoked meats, she was provisioning her forces.

But that was before Nessa had told her the rest of legend, about how the warrior woman apparently could and did lie with any and every man she wished, and furthermore, she wished almost constantly, offering her "friendly thighs" as Nessa so unpleasantly put it as a standard incentive to secure her leadership. This was a difficulty for Branwen for how could she identify with such a one when she could not imagine desiring any man save Maelmuire. And, truth be told, though things were hard between them now, she still could not imagine it. The trouble was only that to be expected between any man and any woman, the weariness of hard labor, the worries of caring for a child, the duty of building together leaving them often with scant time to simply *be* together. But she would have these difficulties with any man and how much harder would they be to endure without the sweet memories of their passion, strong enough to drive them to throw caution to winds and hazard all to be together.

If it had only been that, it would have been bad enough, but it was far worse, for Nessa saw this trait of the warrior not only as a simple quirk of personality but as eminently admirable, an integral part of her power and sovereignty. And Branwen had fumed. According to the legend, this woman had vast wealth, ruled kingdoms, commanded armies. Why was that not enough to make her powerful and self sufficient? If this addition was what was required, she did not want it. But she had wanted it so very much without that. And here she was, poor exile, without even her bride wealth to speak of, only an old copper pot. But Nessa was blissfully unawares, always regaling her with some increasingly disheartening anecdote. Until one day, when Branwen was feeling particularly low, and Nessa had eagerly offered to cheer her by telling her "about the time the woman of the mound had to persuade her foremost champion to take the field with her in a difficult battle, offering him wealth and title and, on top of all, her own friendly thighs if need be."

But she had gotten no further for Branwen had angrily burst out "no need." Branwen frowned at the memory, even as she stumbled over a rut in the path in the dark and fell, leaving her with a bruised knee. Maybe that was the ball of troubles rolling down the hill that had finally reached and crashed into her. She staggered back to her feet and went on, limping slightly. Fortunately, it was warm enough that someone had thoughtfully left the door of the house open, so that a shaft of the warm firelight flowed out enabling her to more easily gather up the washing in the dark. It was clean and dry and in matter of weeks the great labor of making it so would be all to do over again. That was her last thought as she lay down, bone weary, to sleep.

Time passed. The washing had to be done again. Branwen never found any blackberries to make into her special draft but then she did not look terribly hard. Sun comes up. Sun goes down. Knead dough. Bake bread. Gather wood. Feed the animals in the close field. Mind the vegetable garden. It was this last she was engaged in on yet another sunny day, squatting down on her heels to pull out the weeds, to check the leaves of the plants for signs of blight, to pluck any leaves or buds

ready to be eaten and drop them in the wide, flat gathering basket on her hip, and then she would straighten back up, shuffle a few more steps, and then squat again to do it all once more. Gwen was dashing back and forth, tugging on her sleeve, trying to show her some flower she had found under a hedge, asking her to come down to the stream and catch frogs with her, but Branwen impatiently waved her away, all her attention on trying, with as little damage as possible, to carefully untangle the stems of two plants that had grown together so that one did not strangle the other. She could hear the plaintive tone in Gwen's voice when she returned for the fifth time, could see out of the corner of her eye the little stamp of frustration she gave before dashing off again, and tried not to. If she ever allowed herself to become fully aware of how badly she wanted to be off playing with her daughter, she would never be able to get anything done.

Like on every other day, she heard the drum of hooves as Maelmuire came home at day-fall. She could tell from the particular rhythm he must have ridden Liath today. He did not do so terribly often for Liath was not their best cattle horse but, all the same, he did it as often as he could, for Liath was his most special steed, fellow adventure, battle comrade, and now that there was so much work to do, he could not ride Liath in other circumstances nearly as often as he would have liked. Gwen, still full of energy from before, ran laughing to meet him at the fence and Branwen felt a pang, aware of how she was failing her child by not giving her outlet and encouragement for her natural exuberance, increasing the likelihood that it would run dry all the sooner, remembering her own mother doing the same. She could see Maelmuire was weary, as he almost always was on his return these days, but she saw his face light up to see Gwen so eager and he swung down off Liath with a faint echo of his old dash and energy for her sake and she, not noticing the difference, shrieked with delight.

And then, to her even greater glee, he lifted her up and set her on Liath's back and Branwen felt the familiar tangle of queasiness in her belly. Gwen loved horses nearly as much as her father. Almost before she could walk, one of her chiefest joys had been for him to take her riding, perched in front of him on his steed's shoulder or, as now to be lifted up to sit astride as he walked next to the horse, helping to hold her in place. It always made Branwen sick inside, imagining all the things that could go wrong, imagining her precious child losing her seat and tumbling all the way to the ground, to cut her face or strike her head against a rock...or be trampled under the hooves of the beast. She bit her lip, feeling her throat close at the very thought. But she still felt guilty about neglecting Gwen so she did her best to bear with her feelings quietly. After all, what cause for complaint had she if Gwen found her own levity after coming to her for it and being denied?

She tried not to think about the time, looming often in her waking nightmares, when Gwen would no longer be satisfied even with this and would start wanting her own horse and to be taught how to ride it, to ride for real, all on her own, with no protective hands to stop her if something went wrong. Another wave of nausea went through Branwen at the prospect, even as she watched her family approach, seeing with horror that, finding Liath slow and quiet after the day's exertions, Maelmuire was no longer even hovering his hands near Gwen, but had them tucked into his belt as he walked beside her, completely at ease, and she sat straight and balanced on Liath's back all on her own, face bright as he praised her for how well she was doing. It would not be long now. Branwen had to clutch hard on to the wood of the door post to keep herself steady. It did not matter how many times she told herself this was Gwen's hill to climb, the ridge she wanted to reach the top of, to remember the music she had felt inside herself when she had followed the call of her own heart even, or especially, when it was reckless to do so.

Inside, Gwen was still bubbling with enthusiasm, almost tumbling the plates and spilling the jug of cream Branwen gave her to put on the table, as she pressed her father for news. But he shook his head sadly. He had no charming stories about young calves taking their first run over the meadow. Instead, some wasting blight had settled on the cattle, not just their own, but across all the kindred.

Despite the fact that they led them to places where they could eat the richest summer grass, they grew thinner and thinner, ribs standing out, chewing listlessly in the heat.

"Maybe it is only that," suggested Branwen without much conviction.

"I doubt it," her husband replied morosely. "But we must hope for, if they do not perk up soon, we shall have to slaughter many extra come fall, if we do not all wish to get as thin as they are now." And then he made a great show of slathering cream on a round of bread and cramming it into his mouth, indicating he did not wish to speak further. They ate in heavy silence and Gwen, perhaps not fully understanding the topic but able to sense something of its import, glanced nervously from one to the other over her bowl of stew. Sitting silent through it all, Branwen felt a restless energy well up inside her and was very glad when the meal was over and she no longer had to sit still as well. But the need for action continued to fill her to an almost unbearable degree and she escaped outside as soon as she had gotten the rest of her family safely off to bed. Another stone, another set of troubles. At least this time it was late enough that there was no danger of her forgetting to bring a lantern. The small pool of watery light made the ascent much easier even if carrying the stone entirely one handed was an added difficulty and she had to stop and set the lantern down every time she wanted to switch her burden from one arm to the other. Owls called from the shadows and she could hear faint rustles in the leaves which she imagined were the shrews and mice that were their prey. And she felt her heart hover for a moment, wondering what it would be like to be so small and helpless, always braced for those great piercing claws to swoop silently out of the dark.

She remembered the time raiders had ridden up from the south, when Gwen had not yet been able to stand or even to crawl much. She remembered Maelduire buckling on his sword, swinging up onto Liath, and reaching down for the helmet and shield she held up, before galloping away, his golden flag of hair flashing behind him, to join his kinsmen in seeing off the threat. And she, not even able to watch him go, though she knew he might never come back, for, as soon as he was away, she too was running, running into the forest, scrambling over the rough ground of the hill slope, the babe in her arms far heavier than the stone she carried now, heart bursting with the need for rest as she searched desperately for some place where her child might have some hope of staying safely hidden. That was what it must feel like, she thought, for the tiny creatures of the wild.

All that day she had crouched in a small cleft of rock, shuddering like a shrew in the leaf litter when the looming shape passed above. The day had been overcast, the rocks and soil damp, the seeping chill worming its way in even through the wool of her dress and cloak, able to do nothing to ease herself, terrified lest Gwen should wake and cry. The trees were not yet in full leaf and, in addition to the steady drip so close to her ear, she could sometimes hear, though faintly, the sound of shouting down on the plain, the beat of running horses, and the clash of weapons and then her heart would race in her throat, like that of a mouse that had been running past endurance. She could smell blood and smoke on the wind. The sun was already on the way to setting when she heard a long sonorous call that she recognized as the horn of Maelduire's uncle and the pattern of three long calls and then a pause, the signal for safety.

Stirring her chilled and stiff limbs with difficulty, she scrambled back down the hill, not knowing what she might find at the base. Her home burned? Her husband dead? She had emerged from the tangle of undergrowth and was immediately overcome by a weeping Nessa running to embrace her. Despite their differences, she felt nothing but kinship for the other woman in that moment. Soon after, a party of horsemen rode up and Maelduire was there with scarlet in his golden hair, one arm hanging limp, but wondrously alive. Then she and Nessa were very busy for some time, feeding the men and watering their horses. In the end, the damage had been slight. A number of cattle had been killed in the struggle, and some of the outbuildings on the steading of Nessa and her husband Cormac had been burned, no more. But Branwen never forgot the black terror of that day.

Breathless from the steep climb her dark memories had driven her to make more rapidly than she had been aware, she came staggering out onto the crown of the hill, glad indeed to leave the shadows of the trees behind. The white disk of the full moon rode high above, sending down a flood of light bright enough she had no need of the dim lantern and blew out the flame to save the candle, setting it down carefully at the edge of the space about the cairn. The edifice rose stark before her, a silhouette of hard angles between her and the moon. She approached slowly, able to take the stone two handed again. But, as she came close enough to see the cairn clearly, even on its shadow side, she stopped short in shock, almost dropping the heavy rock onto her foot, but managing to clutch it tight with scrabbling fingers and spare herself only just in time.

Before her was the dark hollow in the side of the mound she had seen the last time, even more filled now with bits of fur and moss, rolled unmistakably into a nest ball and, at the center... Branwen almost forgot to breath in her amazement. The nest held an egg but an egg like none she had ever seen before. It was not large, smaller than a hen's egg, but it was black as the night sky, with pale swirls across it like moon flame on clouds and, dotting its surface, flecks of silver that sparkled like stars. It seemed almost to shine in the shadows, the colors and patterns to shift and move. So deep and rich were the hues that it appeared almost to have a velvet nap across its surface so that, if she should touch it, which she would never be so bold as to do, it would feel like the warm sleek coating on the ears of a hound. Hardly daring to move, she edged closer, letting the stone slip from her hands to lie at the foot of the mound, almost too enraptured to notice, let alone to care about the sloppy placement. For a long time she stood gazing upon the beauty of the unearthly object. The white of the moon lit the apex of the cairn with pale fire, then came creeping inch by inch down the near side towards her.

The flow of light reached the egg, washed over it. Its splendor seemed to dull, diluted in the milky glow and she felt a pang at the loss. But, even as she stared hungrily at it, desperate to draw up every last dreg of color, she saw something else. A crack was starting to form across its surface, jagging from side to side, dark against the now drained and hazy curve of the shell, like the sudden blemish across the ice of a pristine winter pond. The crack spread, split, became a lattice of tiny connecting lines, a lace of fine frost, beautiful even in its destruction, unable to endure the moon's light any more than fleeting winter splendor could that of the sun.

The tiny fragile thing burst apart, bits of shell flung wide, falling to dust before they struck the stones around them or simply dissolving and, where the egg had been, lay a tiny coiled shape, gleaming like wet stone, deep rich blue, almost blue-black, overlaid by a surface shimmer of brilliant green, paling into white. Only once in her life had she ever beheld such a color: the sea, the wild breathing depths of it, almost out of sight of shore, as she crossed from the land of her birth to this place. Her waking mind had forgotten what it looked like but, the moment she saw it, she recognized it and all the living tapestry of turbulent emotions she had felt at the time came crashing back over her, like the waves themselves, drenching her in an exquisite spray of feelings, shocking and invigorating in their intensity. And, even as it all rushed through her, the thing in the nest uncurled itself and she saw a tapering head, almost completely filled with the curve of eyes and then a worm of a body go trailing, with little nubs of feet, tiny buds of wings.

The dragonet opened its mouth, extending a tongue delicate as lilacs in spring and, following after it, came, not flame, not even steam, but a single puff of perfumed mist. It took one step, staggered. Its nascent wings beat the air frantically in a vain attempt to help it balance, and it tumbled onto one side. But almost at once it shook itself all along its length and was righting itself to try again. Branwen felt an urge to laugh at its endearing antics while at the same time her heart swelled with a rush of sweet pain at the beauty beyond words. She knew the feeling, the indescribable awe of the fragile preciousness of new life. She had helped Maeltuire deliver calves and lambs over the years, to say nothing of the moment of wonder when Gwen had been laid in her arms for the first time. But this

was different for there was none of the weariness or anxiety that accompanied mere mortal births, no understanding of ongoing obligation created by her participation.

It took another step, floundering with adorable awkwardness as it endeavored to accommodate the shifting material of the nest under its feet, tilting its head to look up at her with one silver-mirror eye, and Branwen felt her heart ache, unsure whether to laugh or weep at the overwhelming emotion, stooping nearer, despite her fear of frightening it away. Instead, the tiny purple-pink tendril of its tongue unfurled, brushing her hand, the touch so faint she hardly felt it but, at the same time a great surge poured through her, like a wind of flame, a drift of apple blossoms, a swirl of frost shards that stung the cheeks to life, like music round a fire at night. Music. The long lost song whose absence she had mourned, for whose return she had prayed. It was this that now filled her, filled her to overflowing, like the hollow of a parched stone suddenly drenched with rain. Her sight, including the precious creature before her, grew dim as her eyes too became mirrors, misted by the tears gathering unshed across their surface.

Disoriented by her blurred vision, Branwen sank to her knees but still keeping her hand extended out before her. A moment only she stayed thus and then she felt strange faint prickles across her skin as it climbed up into her palm. At the sensation, her eyes overflowed at last, the tears running free and the relief was so great it was almost a pleasure in itself to feel them flow over her cheeks. And then, it crouched low in the palm of her hand, arching its back, shuddering the skin around the two bright nubs like a horse trying to throw off a fly and, as it did so, they began to swell and then to unfurl, crumpled tight at first like old leaves, but blooming swiftly into a spreading expanse of crystal membranes and silver veins, catching the moonlight like damselfly wings but only two in number and arched like those of a bat. It beat them frantically, managed to lift and hover for a fraction of a second, before it dropped back into her hand, listing over onto one side, as its tail, like a sliver of sea made solid, was curling up around it.

And now Branwen was laughing through her tears at the sight. The dragonet looked at her searchingly as it made the attempt again and, as she gazed on it, she could by some miracle feel the wild thrill racing through it, the boundless excitement at the adventure of flight opening before it, if not tonight than some other night. "My pretty one," she whispered, "may you always dream to soar ever higher. May the sky be so vast you never reach a point where you feel the best is behind you." In response to the sound of her voice it opened its jaws and gave a little squeak, rather like a mouse but without the frantic terror of any mouse noises Branwen had been so unfortunate as to hear, and redoubled its efforts to lift itself into the air. Three times more it tried and, on the final attempt was actually able to rise fully and dart about in short circles. Branwen felt a sudden terror clutch her as it passed beyond the boundaries of her palm, leaving it with an unbroken drop to the ground. But then its innocent exaltation in its accomplishment came pouring over her and she realized caution counted for so little beside that. For now it risked a fall of only a few feet onto moss and leaves and though, in time, it would soar higher, its strength and skill would grow to match the risk.

But tonight, this brief flight was the limit of its endurance and it tumbled back into her hand, obviously exhausted. It lay there a moment, sides rising and falling, then struggled to its feet and dragged itself back over the side of her hand and into its nest, wilted wings trailing behind it, like silver sails brought down in a storm. But it paused briefly before vanishing entirely under the sheltering blanket of the nest and, turning to look back at her, rubbed its head against the end of her finger. She remained a moment longer, staring blankly as if waking from a dream. The full moon was still high as she made her way back down the hill but, after so long gazing on the shining thing, like a living spark in her hand, the bright moon glow around her seemed dark. She fumbled the flint from her belt pouch and rekindled her lantern. But, though even the circle it cast about her feet appeared dim in her eyes, for all that she could see well enough by it, strangely, she was not sad. In a way, it was a pleasant rest

after what she had just beheld and, in time, her eyes recovered, as though she had been out in the midday sun and come suddenly into the cool shadow of her house, as Maelmuire had come in to her on that long ago day when he had first ridden past.

As her sight became less dazzled, she was able to see the richness in all the shadowy shapes around her, to see them not as they looked beside the dragonet but as the dragonet would see them. She found herself fascinated by the curving shape of tree branches, the way the small plants clung in the hollows of stones, the white whirl of moths as they fluttered around her lantern, almost as if she had never seen any of these things before. Even when she had reached her own front door, it was an effort of will to go back inside, to lie down and sleep. Her blood whispered its yearning to remain out here with the moon, with the wind in the grass, the cry of the night birds, and the smell of the cool damp soil. Keeping her thought focused on how wretchedly weary she would be the next morning when all the accustomed tasks were to be got through just the same, she forced herself to turn her back on the living wonder blooming all around her and shut herself in with the dark and the smell of stale ashes.